

Testimony on *S.B. No. 494 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING GUARDIANS AD LITEM AND ATTORNEYS FOR MINOR CHILDREN IN FAMILY RELATIONS MATTERS

My name is Elizabeth S. Thayer Ph.D. and I am a psychologist and partner at Beacon Behavioral Services LLC, a private mental health practice in Avon, Bloomfield, and Glastonbury. I am also a resident of Avon, Ct. for 26 years. I was also a member of the Task Force on The Care and Custody of Children which concluded on 2/1/14 and submitted its report to your committee at that time.

Beacon Behavioral Services LLC is also home to the PEACE Program which began in 1998 as a program for working with high conflict parent's pre and or post divorce or never married. It remains today as a valuable resource for parents to help them resolve issues together outside of the court process and prevents further litigation and conflict for children of divorce. I am also a co-author of two books entitled The Co-Parenting Survival Guide, Letting Go of Conflict after a Difficult Divorce, and Adult Children of Divorce.

We have worked with many of the GALs in this state as we all attempt to help families of divorce reconfigure with dignity. We have always known and supported the premise that children need a relationship with both parents and that conflict between parents is the most detrimental factor for children and families of divorce. We have also been witness to the devastating effects on children when they are exposed to prolonged conflict and feel caught between their parents as they continue to file motions and to force their children to live their divorce every day of their childhood and on into adulthood as well.

I support Bill 494 with the modifications presented by the Connecticut Bar Association Family Law Section. I support these changes because they just make sense. Only those who do this work everyday can speak to the legal and logistical issues that are addressed in the amendments. The GAL system is anything but broken. It just needs to evolve as does any profession as new areas are identified and new technology is available and new ideas for making the process better are suggested.

I believe this bill is a good start on the road to the implementation of many more of the excellent recommendations made by the majority of the Task Force. In particular I am referring to the recommendations for support of alternative dispute models including the Early Intervention Program, a solely volunteer program wherein parents meet in the first ninety days post filing with a mental health professional and lawyer for a full day to settle the parenting portion of their agreement. This program exists only in some jurisdictions and should be available for parents throughout the state courts. Another resource is the Families in Transition Program run by the Children's Law Center, a nonprofit dedicated to providing free legal services for families and children who could not afford these services on their own. The Families in Transition Program

is again solely volunteer where a mental health professional and a lawyer are paired to meet with parents to resolve issues and teach them how to co-parent effectively and reduce conflict and improve communication. The Focus on Kids Program is a sliding scale program which is housed under the Connecticut Council for Family Service Agencies. There parents meet with an individual mental health professional for the same purpose of resolving disputes, developing parent plans, and learning how to communicate and make decisions together without legal involvement. In addition within the private practice sector our PEACE Program has been the training program for both Focus on Kids and Families in Transition and operates within our private practice serving thousands of families. In all these programs the mental health professional works with the attorneys involved especially the GALs as a team when needed. The Task Force recommended additional funding for the Early Intervention Program, the Families in Transition Program, and Focus on Kids so that a much wider range of population can be reached and more families offered services that we know can be effective and preventative in a proactive manner. Often these services can prevent the need for a GAL or lessen their involvement and the cost to families. I would hope that you will consider amending the bill to include the recommendations for increasing the funding and support for these essential services.

The Role of a GAL is essential when families exhaust all other intervention techniques and children are caught in unending conflict without resolution of where they are going to live, how they are going to see both parents, where they may be going to school, and how their world will reorganize after the divorce. They do not have the opportunity to go on with their lives when parents are not able to resolve their differences efficiently and without protracted litigation or legal involvement. This can extend into adulthood where adult children of divorce inherit their parents' conflict and cannot freely live their lives without it being infiltrated by old hurts and animosity. The GALs in this state are dedicated to preventing that kind of life for the children of divorce. We are in danger of losing our most competent and experienced GALs and mental health professionals. It is unfair to ask them to spend their time trying to defend unwarranted complaints and grievances when they should be spending it doing the work of focusing on the children

The argument that there is not enough diversity in the assignment of GALs is also unfounded. Those choices are often made because those are the experienced GALs and so parents want that expertise. We all choose so many professionals in our lives (doctors, accountants, tutors for children, coaches, etc.) precisely because they have the most experience. In my practice new psychologists and social workers who would like to work in the PEACE Program are supervised and not even offered that opportunity until they have a few years of therapy experience post receiving their degree. The work is complicated, not something taught in graduate school, and training and supervision is necessary. Why would you want to eliminate those who have so much wisdom and knowledge from years of participation in these cases?

There is no collusion between lawyers for parents, GALs, judges and mental health professionals! There is collaboration and dedication to resolving the concerns quickly and hopefully in a long lasting manner. I tell every parent who walks through my door for the PEACE Program that my job is not to have one with them very long. I want them to take their

hard earned income and use it for their children and themselves. I want them to go on with their lives. I tell them that they are the parents who have a responsibility to figure all this out for their children and to allow them full permission to have a relationship with both parents lifelong. Parents know their children far better than any evaluator, parent counselor, lawyer, or judge but when they cannot use that knowledge and love to put aside their own fears and anger and pain they may need some help. They should be given all opportunities to hear the damage they will cause by continuing the conflict emotionally and economically. If this is ineffective then the process should be as responsive, timely, efficient, and respectful as possible.

We need constructive changes, realistic changes that can be implemented, not destructive rhetoric that only serves to try to eliminate the entire family court system and is focused on maligning the reputation of professionals by filing grievances and complaints with the committees/boards that oversee them. The Task Force was set up to do its job and it did. I agreed to be on the Task Force out of a sincere desire to continue to help families of divorce have the best resources available to achieve a goal of a new family unit and to go on to a future where their children's' futures are not continually riddled by their parents' animosity and inability to resolve their issues without intervention. Let us remember that the majority of parents divorce without this level of contention. They believe that their children will suffer the long lasting effects of their divorce if they do not do the difficult work of always putting their needs first and foremost. For those who cannot they need competent GALs and all the other mediation resources we can provide. The system may need some changes but overall it works and those who say something else are not finished dealing with their own anger, hurt, and need to blame. They become addicted to the conflict and then we have an obligation to help their children not be dragged into years of protracted litigation. .